

STATEMENT OF DANIEL N. WENK, DEPUTY DIRECTOR, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS OF THE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES CONCERNING S. 1808, TO AUTHORIZE THE EXCHANGE OF LAND WITHIN DENALI NATIONAL PARK TO PROVIDE FOR IMPROVED RAILROAD SERVICE.

SEPTEMBER 27, 2007

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to present the views of the Department of the Interior on S. 1808, a bill to authorize the exchange of exclusive use easements between the National Park Service and the Alaska Railroad within Denali National Park.

The Department supports S. 1808.

S. 1808 would authorize the Secretary of the Interior to convey to the Alaska Railroad (Railroad) an exclusive use easement to not more than 25 acres of land in exchange for the Railroad's relinquishment of an exclusive use easement of equal size to the federal government. The bill would limit the use of the easement conveyed to the Railroad to activities necessary for the operation of the railway. The bill would also require the Railroad to pay the costs associated with the exchange, including the costs for surveys and compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). To complete the exchange, the Alaska Legislature would have to approve any release of Railroad land interests as the Alaska Railroad is a state-owned corporation. The exchange would have to be carried out within five years after enactment.

Both easements in question are located within Denali National Park on land owned by the federal government. The exchange of easements would not affect federal ownership of underlying lands. The easement conveyed to the Railroad would be used to build a train turn-around at Denali National Park. The easement relinquished by the Railroad would be managed in its natural state as part of Denali National Park. If it is adjacent to the Denali Wilderness, this bill would add the land to the wilderness.

The Alaska Railroad provides passenger rail service from Whittier, Anchorage, and Fairbanks to Denali National Park. In 2005, the Alaska Railroad carried more than 260,000 passengers to Denali National Park. In 2006, that number rose to over 300,000. The Railroad's ability to manage this increasing traffic is limited by the lack of a turn-around at Denali. Under current conditions, trains carrying visitors from Anchorage to Denali must continue to Fairbanks. Trains traveling south from Fairbanks to Denali must likewise continue to Anchorage. To accommodate existing traffic, the Railroad concentrates passenger service into two trains to Denali per day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. These trains average 20 coach cars in length and carry up to 1,500 passengers each. The arrival of so many visitors to the park at one time often causes congestion, crowding, and traffic. For example, visitors who travel by train to Denali Park Station must travel by bus to enter the park. The concentration of rail traffic results in two major "pulses" of buses that leave the park entrance and travel into the park each day.

A turnaround would allow trains to run round trips from either Fairbanks or Anchorage to the park. It would offer the Railroad the ability to economically use smaller trains and to offer more trips to the park each day. This expanded schedule would, in turn, allow the park to smooth out the bus schedule and provide a less crowded experience for visitors.

The lands that would be affected by this bill are within the boundary of Denali National Park and owned by the federal government. The Alaska Railroad Transfer Act of 1982 (45 U.S.C. Sections 1201-1214) conveyed to the state an exclusive use easement to the Railroad for the approximately 35 miles of track through park. This Act limited the use of the easement to activities necessary for the operation of the railway and mandated that the state operate the Railroad subject to laws and regulations for the protection of park values. S. 1808 would apply these same conditions to the easement it conveys to the Railroad.

Although not specified in the bill, the proposed location of the turn-around is approximately four miles south of Denali Park Station on land that has been determined to be unsuitable for wilderness designation. The Railroad has identified four parcels of land that are of interest to the National Park Service.

The National Park Service believes that full public involvement in the planning process should occur prior to deciding if a land exchange should occur. This would occur through the NEPA compliance that is provided for in the proposed legislation.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or the other members of the subcommittee may have.